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Using Internet for Learning Vocabulary among Second Language Learners in a Suburban School

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Abstract

Vocabulary learning is usually dealt with when learners come across new words while doing reading or listening tasks in class. Different techniques have been adopted by second language learners in order to learn vocabulary. This paper investigated whether the technique of using computer as a tool assist the learning of vocabulary among second language learners in a suburban secondary school in Malaysia. The method involved pre-test and post-test for both experimental and control group of second language learners. Findings suggested that the experimental group showed great result in learning vocabulary using computer.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Vocabulary Learning

Vocabulary is commonly assumed to be the least important in second language teaching as “teachers seem to be keen on teaching grammar and pronunciation, and vocabulary a poor third” [1]. This is further supported by the view that vocabulary is usually an incidental learning, limited to presenting new items as they appeared in reading and sometimes listening text [2]. Seeing vocabulary vary in rich contexts provided by authentic texts,

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rather than in isolated vocabulary drills, produces robust vocabulary learning [3]. Learners feel that inadequacy in vocabulary resulted in their difficulties in both receptive and productive language use [4]. This is even worse if learners come from background in which English is not their primary language. Thus, they are less able to comprehend text at grade level [5].

1.2 Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension

The knowledge of vocabulary accommodates the comprehension of a reading text. Literacy experts share the belief that vocabulary knowledge and the ability to inextricably linked, the breadth and depth of a student's vocabulary is a key predictor of his or her ability to understand a wide range of texts [6]. This is true for both native speakers of English and second language learners [7].

Learners' schemata are activated when they come across difficult words in a reading text. At this point, they are ready to learn the new words and best learnt in context. Various methods can be used to help these learners such as guessing meaning from context and using dictionary. On the contrary, to help learners assimilate and remember the new words better, they need more tasks in which teachers would have to spend more time and this is where direct teaching of vocabulary comes in.

1.3 Vocabulary Learning and Reading Comprehension Using Computer

"The computer explosion and the Internet have transformed the environment in which language is used and learning takes place" [1]. Thus, the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has been a remarkable development in the educational technology. Computer can provide rich, contextual environment for vocabulary learning and consequently allows learners to become active in one-to-one learning environment. Graney and Mokhtari [8] suggested that practice with high frequency vocabulary through CALL does benefit reading. This is because computer as a tool offers great potential to enhance vocabulary instruction; external stimulation, rich graphic, and online rewards. These in turn provide ample opportunities for learners to encounter new words in multiple context by allowing them quick access to text and graphic and immediate access to vast information [9].

1.4 Using World Wide Web in Learning English

The plethora of resources provided by computer can be exploited for second language learning purposes. Easy access to the World Wide Web has given both teachers and learners the benefits to use it at one's fingertip. Mill [10] stated that "there are tremendous search capabilities of the Web which allow instant access to up-to-date information on just about any topic imaginable". Thus, it has gained immense popularity among language teachers and learners. Some of the supplemental language activities that could be incorporated in the classrooms are reading tests and comprehension questions, grammar exercises, pronunciation exercises, vocabulary tests and so forth.

2. Methods

The samples were 30 second language learners (15 years old) in a suburban secondary school with intermediate proficiency level. They were divided into two groups, control and experimental. The study ran for 5 weeks in which it involved vocabulary pre-test, treatment and post-test. The vocabulary pre-test was administered so that the data (in the form of marks) would be used as point of comparison with the vocabulary post-test. The vocabulary pre-test contained 30 multiple choice questions on vocabulary which the learners came across while completing the reading tasks during the treatment.

Both groups were given the same treatment but in different medium; the control group was given printed reading texts together with the reading tasks which were downloaded from the internet, while the experimental group used internet to read the texts and complete the reading tasks online. The website that was used was <http://literacynet.org/cnnsf>. Learners in the latter group were instructed to read specific texts and complete the activities online. Both groups were using the same reading texts and tasks. The only difference was the discussion part. The discussion of answers to the reading tasks was done between the teacher and the learners in the control group. On the other hand, learners in the experimental group received immediate feedback from the computer once they completed the reading tasks. So, the teacher's role in the experimental group is more to supervising and monitoring.

The post-test was administered in the fifth week after three weeks of treatment. The same set of questions for the pre-test was used to see the significance of learning vocabulary using computer. For this purpose, the marks between pre-test and post-test of both groups were compared.

The other method of data collection is the teacher's reflection as a journal entry in which the teacher recorded what is being observed in the classroom. The reflection was mainly on students' behaviour while doing the activities in the classroom. The data was analysed and concluded based on the common behaviour displayed by the learners.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Pre-test and Post-test

The data obtained from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed and arranged according to the control and experimental group. Table 1 illustrates the comparison of the pre-test and post-test results for both groups.

Table 1: Comparison of the pre-test and post-test results for control and experimental groups.

Differences between pre-test and post-test	Control Group (%)	Experimental Group (%)
Learner 1	10	20
Learner 2	13	10
Learner 3	7	27
Learner 4	3	13
Learner 5	6	24
Learner 6	10	16
Learner 7	0	10
Learner 8	13	20
Learner 9	23	16
Learner 10	20	13
Learner 11	13	13
Learner 12	17	17
Learner 13	14	27
Learner 14	7	17
Learner 15	7	20

The data showed there is an increase in marks for both groups after they were given the different treatment. The increase marks for the control group is between 3 per cent to 23 per cent while the experimental group has an

increase between 10 per cent to 27 per cent. It can be concluded that the treatment for the control group which used the printed material downloaded from the Internet had an effect on the learners. This showed that they were able to understand the meaning of the new words introduced to them. However, *Learner 7* is an exception as he got the same marks for both the pre-test and post-test. This may be done to misunderstanding of the new vocabulary.

For the experimental group, there was a higher increase of marks and this can be summarized by the learners' better understanding of new vocabulary through the use of computer. Thus, it can be deduced that the experimental group performed better after the treatment of using computer to learn new vocabulary. The use of computer helped learners to perform better in learning vocabulary compared to using the printed materials. The interface of the website could have great effect on learners' performance in understanding the vocabulary. The layout and the 'click' of the mouse may be more engaging to the learners in learning compared to the printed materials. Since the learners were in a suburban school, computer was not frequently used for language learning. The most exposure that they had was one-to-many computer whereby the teacher would be placing the computer in front of the class and the learners would be looking at the content projected on the big screen. So, the one-to-one experience of using computer in the classroom was very rare. By incorporating it in language classroom, learners would get the motivation to use and explore more on the use of computer.

The findings may also be the result of the immediate feedback that learners get after answering the vocabulary questions that proceed the reading text. Each vocabulary question asks for meaning based on the context it is used in the text. The options are in the form of multiple-choice and learners are required to click one answer only. They would obtain a smile icon, ;-), for every correct answer while an incorrect answer is given an 'X', see Fig 1. This is the immediate feedback that learners would get when answering the wrong answer for the vocabulary. This immediate feedback helps learners to better understand the vocabulary in the context it is used. The correct answer is given promptly and this assists in learning the vocabulary. Thus, when learning takes place as they were making errors, they would apply what they had learnt eventually and this is proven in the result of the post-test.

ACTIVITY INSTRUCTIONS

For each item: - click on one of the boxes

If you are right: - the square beside the box gets an ";-)" in it

If you are wrong: - the square beside the box gets an "X" in it

Vocabulary

1 exceed

☐

to not reach the limit

☐

to go beyond the limit

☐

to be bad

☐

to run out

2 routine

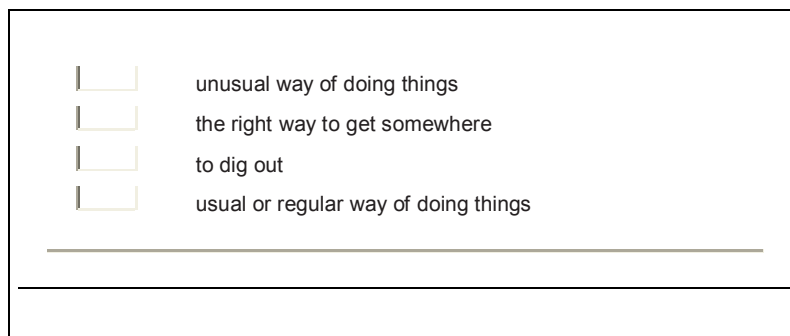


Fig. 1. Immediate feedback obtained by learners

In contrast to the control group, the feedback that the learners received was the discussion of answers with the teacher. This was carried out after learners had answered all the vocabulary and comprehension questions. The delayed feedback given by the teacher may not be as effective as the immediate feedback. The human factor may also interfere with learners' learning the vocabulary as they may not understand the vocabulary in context but remained quiet instead of asking for further clarification from the teacher. The delayed feedback could not also assist the learners in reinforcing the vocabulary learnt compared to the immediate feedback received by the experimental group. Through reinforcement, learners could learn better and faster. Hence, this could be the contributing factor of why the learners in the control group did not perform as good as those in the experimental group.

3.2 Teacher Reflection

Based on the teacher's reflection, it can be summarized that learners in the experimental group were rather quiet as they were very attentive looking at the computer screen, completing the tasks online. There was minimal interaction between learners-learners as most of the time they were busy reading and answering the questions while interaction between teacher-learners only happened at the beginning of the lesson when the teacher was giving instruction to the learners on how to go about navigating the website. The learners seemed to be at ease exploring the online activities with some of them would peek at their friends sitting nearby, looking at what they were doing. It had been pointed out earlier that learners rarely get the chance to use the computer, one-to-one. However, that was not a hindrance for them to explore the website, navigating from page-to-page as it was user friendly. The instruction on the website was easily understood by the learners. There were occasions whereby few students put up their hands asking for the teacher's assistance mainly due to unintended mistakes of clicking the reload button or the 'back' button. Overall, learners seemed to be enjoying the tasks amidst unintentional mistakes done by few learners, which did not disrupt the flow of the lesson.

On the other hand, for the control group, interaction for both teacher-learners and learners-learners transpired frequently as it started off with teacher giving instruction, discussing the reading text and finally discussing the answers to the questions between teacher and learners. Learners who seemed to be having problem understanding the text would ask their friends sitting next to them or simply looked at their friends' answer. Some students had to spend some time looking up the meaning of words in the dictionary in order to comprehend the text. The puckered brow, the learners-learners interaction and head scratching were displayed by learners in which could be an indicator that they were having difficulties comprehending the text and completing the tasks. While these actions were displayed, the teacher remained seated as observant unless being called by the learners who wanted to ask questions. However, most of the time, the learners would rather ask their friends rather than the teacher. The reason might be that the learners felt inferior of the proficiency that hindered them from asking the teacher

and rather instead to their peers. During the discussion of answers between the teacher and learners, it was observed that only a few learners responded by giving the answers. The others remained quiet and simply jotted down the correct answer if theirs' were incorrect. Most of the time, those who remained quiet avoided having eye contact with the teacher as they fear that they would be called up by the teacher to answer the question. Having experience in handling such situation with the same group of learners, the teacher would usually nominate those learners to answer instead. When their names were being called, they had no choice but to give the answer. Only by implementing this technique that the teacher would know whether the learners really understood the vocabulary in context. Thus, all these behaviours observed by the teacher further supported the learners' achievement on the post-test.

4. Conclusion and Implication

In conclusion, the experimental group which underwent treatment using the online reading tasks showed tremendous increase in the post-test compared to the control group which used printed material from the same websites. The immediate response/feedback that learners get while completing the reading activities online proved to be a great help in learning vocabulary. In a study conducted by Cordoso [11] on 30 Brazilian students learning English, claimed that students "perceived the online response system as a positive addition to their classes. It does not only increases participation and the general enjoyment of classes but also contributes to learning, fosters interactions, and allows learners to self-assess and compare their performance with that of their peers". Another study among 17 Turkish students learning French as foreign language by using the internet, resulted in increase of scores obtained in vocabulary quizzes in comparison to lessons conducted without the internet [12]. Thus, it is proven that computer does assist the learning of vocabulary among second or foreign language learners.

This finding can also be used as reference by second language teachers and learners to enhance the learning process in the language classroom and to boost the mundane and traditional vocabulary learning process. In addition, by integrating the use of computer in the language learning, it is believed that second language learners will be able to learn vocabulary effectively and develop their potential in experiencing different methods of learning. The similar result was gained by a study conducted by Esit [13] in which the reading activities done through the use of intelligent computer-assisted language learning application had proved to have positive effects on both learners' vocabulary learning and their attitudes. The same claim was highlighted that learners became highly motivated in learning language with the computer than with conventional method [14]. Thus, the role of the computer in language learning serves as a major factor in learners' vocabulary learning.

As internet plays a very big role in the life of today's society, it is crucial for second language learners to be exposed to the use of Internet and experience its usage in the classroom setting. For this matter, the incorporation of websites and computer in second language classroom will be fruitful especially for vocabulary learning. This notion is shared by a study conducted among 53 students in Saudi Arabia who used online learning in EFL vocabulary instruction, recorded significant differences in comparison between pre-test and post-test with 53 mean scores [15]. So, internet has its role in vocabulary learning. Using the internet for language learning purposes may be relatively new to these learners as they may use it as a medium of entertainment and e-mail. Hence, the thought of using internet for language learning may require training of the learners how to navigate and use the online resources. "A published "user's guide" on the site itself, that explains what to do and how to proceed, is something to be initiated" [16] by the language teacher. This would further assist learners to explore the use of internet for language learning, in particular vocabulary learning.

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